

**HIGHER EDUCATION FOR JUSTICE-IMPACTED INDIVIDUALS**

*Real-World Project Submitted by Dr. Angela Lawhorne, Director of Career Education  
Programs and Workforce Partnerships with the Virginia Community College System  
October 19, 2023*

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### **Higher Education for Justice-Impacted Individuals**

“Justice-impacted individual” refers to a person who has been affected by the criminal justice system. This impact can be direct, such as having been incarcerated, on probation, or under parole supervision. It can also be indirect, where a close family member or dependent has experienced these criminal justice interventions. The term recognizes that the impact of the justice system extends beyond the period of incarceration or legal supervision, often affecting various aspects of a person’s life. These effects can include limitations in employment opportunities, education, and housing and social stigma, all of which can pose challenges to reintegration into society.

The justice system in Virginia, like many others across the United States, has a complex history marked by evolving policies and societal norms. The Justice Policy Institute (2013, 2022) conducted extensive research on Virginia’s justice system, noting that Virginia’s penal code has undergone significant transformations, reflecting broader national trends such as the “tough on crime” era that led to increased incarceration rates. This approach has disproportionately affected minority communities, creating a lasting impact on individuals and families within these groups. In recent years, Virginia has taken steps toward criminal justice reform, including efforts to reduce mandatory minimum sentences and provide more support for reentry programs. However, the system’s legacy continues to pose challenges for justice-impacted individuals in the state. The barriers to employment, education, and housing that often follow a criminal conviction have implications not just for those directly involved in the system but also for Virginia’s broader community development and economic stability.

Education serves as the gateway to economic opportunity; however, approximately 41% of incarcerated individuals do not possess a high school diploma. According to the Center for American Progress (2018), “In 2016, the Vera Institute of Justice reported that only 35 percent of state prisons provided college-level courses, and these programs only serve 6 percent of incarcerated individuals nationwide.” The benefit of improved economic opportunity does not stand alone in this effort. Reduced recidivism rates also prove to be a key finding when incorporating postsecondary education opportunities. The Center for American Progress (2018) also referenced a study by the U.S. Sentencing Commission noting that “individuals who did not complete high school were rearrested at the highest rate—60.4 percent—while those who had a college degree were rearrested at a rate of 19.1 percent.”

In this context, a concerted effort by policymakers, educational institutions, and private businesses is essential to support the successful reintegration of justice-impacted individuals into society and fully harness their potential within the workforce.

### **Introduction**

As of July 2023, Virginia had more than 24,000 incarcerated individuals within its state prison system with its estimated demographics at 56% Black, 40% White, and 3% Hispanic. Forty-five percent were under 29 years of age, 30% were 30–39, and 26% were over the age of 40. According to the Prison Policy Initiative (2023) regarding Virginia’s incarcerated population, another 24,000 are in local jails (with 111,000 cycling through each year), 4,600 are in federal prisons, 920 are youth in detention centers, and 810 are considered involuntary commitment. Factoring in these additional incarceration numbers for Virginia jails, federal prisons, and detention centers, 60% are Black, 16% American Indian/Alaska Native, 12% White, and 12% Hispanic. These numbers do not include the additional 60,000 individuals on probation and 1,800 on parole, bringing the total to over 116,000 justice-impacted individuals currently incarcerated or under supervision in Virginia (Prison Policy Initiative, 2023).

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Meanwhile, the Virginia Employment Commission (2022) reported 199,000 unfilled jobs in the state. To help close the employment gap and get justice-impacted individuals in these jobs, more needs to be done to train and expand career pathways and opportunities for this population.

### **Project Purpose**

This project aimed to increase equity and access to postsecondary Career Technical Education (CTE) from Virginia's community colleges for the justice-impacted population by standardizing program development procedures; creating best practices for colleges that want to launch new CTE programs within walls (includes carceral settings such as prisons and jails); and creating a platform that provides resources, career pathways, and credit for prior learning (CPL) resources for the justice-impacted population. Residual outcomes may include improved quality of life, reduced recidivism rates, and enhanced employment outcomes for those affected by the justice system.

Project outcomes included the development of a Canvas course that houses information to be used statewide. The course contains numerous modules including the following:

- the required Virginia Department of Corrections (VaDOC) training for those who want to enter or provide services within walls
- a checklist for offering new programs within VaDOC
- a program crosswalk with VaDOC CTE programs and the logical next step for programs at Virginia's community colleges
- points of contact for VaDOC and college liaisons
- 2023 Pell Grant reinstatement information and a new customized Free Application for Federal Student Assistance form and instructions
- frequently asked questions about program, facility, technology, and student limitations
- best practices and resources for colleges and VaDOC

A webpage for justice-impacted individuals was created on the Credits2Careers website. The newly developed portal houses CPL resources for military veterans and students. The web developer had agreed to create a page to house resources for justice-impacted individuals. While evaluating CPL for all VaDOC CTE programs offered by Virginia's community colleges is not within the scope and time frame of this project, the page houses resources for justice-impacted individuals and those assisting them. These resources include career pathways from VaDOC CTE programs into community college programs, apprenticeship and work-based learning resources, and employers who are hiring individuals with barriers. In the future, CPL for all VaDOC CTE programs will be mapped to Virginia Community College System (VCCS) CTE programs, allowing individuals to continue their education with additional related credits and credentials.

### **Background**

VaDOC has roughly 40 facilities. VCCS has 23 colleges with 40 campuses. Bringing these two entities together may reduce recidivism while producing workforce talent for Virginia. Recidivism, or the tendency for previously incarcerated individuals to reoffend, poses significant social and economic challenges in the United States. A growing body of evidence demonstrates that education within the correctional system plays a vital role in

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reducing recidivism rates. By providing incarcerated individuals with the opportunity to acquire new skills and knowledge, correctional education fosters personal growth, enhances employability, and supports successful reintegration into society.

Correctional education encompasses a wide range of programs, including adult basic education, vocational training, secondary education, and even higher education courses. These programs are designed to address diverse needs, helping incarcerated individuals build foundational skills, earn certifications, or obtain degrees. The effectiveness of these programs is well documented. A meta-analysis conducted by the RAND Corporation found that incarcerated individuals who participated in correctional education programs were 43% less likely to reoffend compared to those who did not. The study also revealed that every dollar invested in correctional education saves nearly five dollars in incarceration costs over 3 years (Davis et al., 2013).

VaDOC (2022) reported that employment rates jumped from 37% for those who did not participate in training while incarcerated, to 49% for incarcerated individuals who were CTE completers. CTE completers also experienced higher earnings compared to their peers. VaDOC found that individuals who completed CTE courses during incarceration were less likely to recidivate and more likely to find employment, citing a 14.4% recidivism rate for CTE completers compared to 22.3% for non-CTE completers.

Despite the clear benefits, challenges persist in implementing and maintaining correctional education programs. Funding constraints, limited access to qualified instructors and coordinators to manage programs, limited access to technology, and varying institutional policies can hinder program effectiveness. Additionally, stigma and discrimination against justice-impacted individuals may limit the applicability of education and training outside prison walls. In response, many states are exploring innovative strategies, partnerships, and policies to expand educational opportunities within the correctional system. Collaborations between correctional institutions and community colleges, for instance, can create seamless pathways to education and employment upon release. Technology, such as online Lockdown courses and datacasting, can further extend educational access and tailor learning to individual needs.

### **Impact in Virginia**

The intended impact of this project included expanding postsecondary CTE programs from Virginia's community colleges within prisons and jails while increasing access and equity for the justice-impacted population. Jails and detention centers present audiences with fewer limitations (increased facility and technology access compared to prisons) and are prime examples of populations who can benefit from Virginia community colleges' FastForward noncredit stackable credential programs (VCCS, 2022).

As of 2021, an estimated eight of the 23 community colleges in Virginia offered postsecondary education for incarcerated students. CTE is not offered at numerous VaDOC facilities. Despite Virginia having a low recidivism rate compared to other states, there still exists a lack of trained individuals who are ready for the workforce upon release. Providing training opportunities and bringing VaDOC (along with jails, detention centers, and probation and parole) and VCCS together to work on this issue will strengthen Virginia's workforce, increase VCCS enrollments, and reduce recidivism while producing viable citizens who are employed and giving back to their communities.

I currently have oversight of the Virginia Higher Education for Incarcerated Students Consortium. Since its start in 2018 with 40 members, we have grown our membership to more than 100 individuals in 2023. Members include VCCS; VaDOC; jails; universities; and

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partners such as the Vera Institute of Justice, Resilience Education, and the Interfaith Center for Public Policy. We have also hired a coordinator for higher education for justice-impacted individuals to strengthen and expand these efforts. Along with funding secured from the Laughing Gull Foundation (LGF), we were able to increase our efforts utilizing these resources to affect change by standardizing processes and resources and expanding access to postsecondary education for justice-impacted individuals.

Barriers for this project included gathering information and responses from outside sources such as VaDOC and the 23 colleges. VCCS also did not actively collect enrollment data on incarcerated and formerly incarcerated students or regarding the programming colleges offer within walls. In addition to the funding to hire a coordinator, LGF approved the hire of a part-time instructional designer to create the Canvas course and add content to the Credits2Careers website, but the data needed for this project were to come from the consortium members, community colleges, and partners.

### Method of Evaluation

Success was to be measured in multiple ways with this project. These methods included evaluating increases in the proposed deliverables in Table 1.

**Table 1.**

#### *Method of Evaluation*

METRIC	MEASURE
Number of new programs implemented within walls	Increase in programs offered by September 1, 2023
Number of incarcerated students enrolled in and completing VCCS postsecondary education programs	Increase in incarcerated student enrollment by September 1, 2023
Number of VCCS colleges offering programs within walls	Increase in colleges offering programs by September 1, 2023
Number of released students enrolled in VCCS colleges	Increase in released students enrolled in VCCS
Canvas course	Created by June 30, 2023
Credits2Careers page for justice-impacted individuals	Created by June 30, 2023
Increased participation in the Higher Education for Incarcerated Students Consortium	Increase in consortium members by September 1, 2023

To capture measurable increases in the number of new programs implemented within walls, the number of incarcerated students enrolled in and completing VCCS postsecondary education programs, the number of VCCS colleges offering programs within walls, and the number of released students enrolled in VCCS colleges, a quantitative survey was developed and distributed via Qualtrics and emailed to the 23 community colleges in Virginia.

The purpose of the survey read as follows:

The Virginia Community College System is seeking data on college progress in expanding and deepening educational programs in prisons and jails. Information

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collected will be used for a variety of purposes, including making future applications for grants and other funding and assisting us in supporting your important work. We ask that you complete the survey as soon as possible with the understanding that even if your college did or does not have a program for incarcerated individuals, to complete the survey and indicate that so we can report on gaps. The survey deadline is 9/1/2023. Again, data will be used to seek additional funding and resources and better assist colleges with launching/expanding [prison education programs] and postsecondary education programs in jails and other carceral institutions.

The instructions read as follows:

Think about your Prison Education programs (PEP) from January 1, 2020, through June 30, 2023, then answer the following for each calendar year. If your college had no PEP for a given year, please indicate with a “0” or N/A for each response. For purposes of this survey, a PEP is any educational program that originates from your college or is administered by college staff.

Colleges responding to the survey provided contact information such as name, email address, and which college they represented. Respondents then chose which years (if any) their colleges administered PEPs (2020, 2021, and/or 2022). Respondents were then provided questions for each year they indicated PEPs were offered.

The survey questions read as follows:

Q1. How many total PEP programs serving currently incarcerated persons were administered through your college? These may include Prison Education Programs, programs not receiving federal monies, partnerships with local reentry councils, private gifts, or grants and the like.

Q2. How many total PEP programs specifically serving formerly incarcerated persons and/or their families were administered through your college? These may include Prison Education Programs, programs not receiving federal monies, partnerships with local reentry councils, private gifts, or grants and the like.

Q3. Considering all programs at your college, how many were:

- Taught at Department of Corrections facilities?
- Taught at local or regional jails?
- Taught at or in partnership with local reentry councils?
- Taught at or in partnership with probation and parole officers?
- Credential/workforce-related programs?

Q4. Please list courses administered through your college in (2020, 2021, 2022).

Q5. Please list names of degrees and credentials your college offered in (2020, 2021, 2022) as part of your PEP.

Q6. What was the total number of **formerly** incarcerated students who continued their education at your college in academic year (2020, 2021, 2022)?

Q7. What percentage of incarcerated or formerly incarcerated students enrolled in PEP programs used the following funding sources in (2020, 2021, 2022)?

- Workforce Credentials Grant (WCG)
- G3
- FANTIC
- PELL
- Scholarships or Private Funding



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Q8. By what means did you communicate funding options and educational opportunities to prospective students in carceral or post carceral facilities?

Q9. IF you had a program that engaged employers about the value of hiring formerly incarcerated candidates:

- With how many employers did you engage?
- With how many employers did you work directly to place students?
- With how many reentry councils or other third parties did you work?

Q10. IF you tracked or collected other data about graduates of PEPs:

- What data did you collect?
- What collection methods did you use?

Q11. In (2020, 2021, 2022), what were the main challenge(s) your college experienced in **establishing** PEP programming?

Q12. In (2020, 2021, 2022), what were the main challenge(s) your college experienced in **maintaining** PEP programming?

Q13. In (2020, 2021, 2022), what could the VCCS System Office have done better to support your work in establishing or maintaining PEPs?

For the metrics of Canvas course and Credits2Careers page for justice-impacted individuals, completion was measured by the creation, access, and review of both resources by consortium members. For the metric of increased participation in the Higher Education for Incarcerated Students Consortium, the count of email addresses in the consortium distribution list provided the number of members both before and after the fellowship period.

### Summary of Findings

Table 2 summarizes the project outcomes. The quantitative data were derived from the 2023 survey completed by Virginia's community colleges.

**Table 2.**

#### *Project Outcomes*

METRIC	MEASURE	OUTCOME
Number of new programs implemented within walls	Increase in programs offered by September 1, 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● 10 net new programs implemented in 2022</li><li>● 4 net new programs being implemented in 2023</li></ul>
Number of incarcerated students enrolled in and completing VCCS postsecondary education programs	Increase in incarcerated student enrollment by September 1, 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>● Unduplicated headcount: 2020 — 233 students 2021 — 79 students 2022 — 392 students</li><li>● Program completers: 2020 — 4 students 2021 — 25 students 2022 — 60 students</li></ul>

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Number of VCCS colleges offering programs within walls	Increase in colleges offering programs by September 1, 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● 13 colleges offered programs within walls in 2022</li> <li>● 2 new colleges working with VaDOC to create a PEP in 2023</li> <li>● 4 new programs being developed in 2023</li> </ul>
Number of released students enrolled in VCCS colleges	Increase in released students enrolled in VCCS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Decrease from 14 in 2020 to 8 in 2022</li> </ul>
Canvas course	Created by June 30, 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Complete</li> </ul>
Credits2Careers page for justice-impacted individuals	Created by June 30, 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Complete</li> </ul>
Increased participation in the Higher Education for Incarcerated Students Consortium	Increase in consortium members by September 1, 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Increase from 40 members in 2020 to 112 in 2023</li> </ul>

Fifty-five community college staff responded to the quantitative survey, including more than one response from some colleges. Duplicated responses were removed from the results. Out of the 23 community colleges, 13 (57%) indicated having PEPs in the years 2020–22. It should be noted that a few colleges that did have programs during that period did not respond to the survey, and their data could not be counted in this study. The pandemic also will continue to skew the data on the impact of this project and efforts of the colleges to ramp up enrollments and launch new PEPs. Because the survey was conducted in September 2023, program data for the year 2023 could not be counted, though colleges did respond to the narrative portion of the survey asking if they were starting programs in 2023.

Response data from the year 2020 were used as the baseline. Data from 2021 were almost nonexistent due to coronavirus pandemic shutdowns and the absence of technology and online options within prisons and jails. Data from 2022 were compared to 2020 to measure any increases in program offerings. The four new programs being implemented in 2023 (captured via narrative response in the survey) are occurring at new VaDOC facilities where programs do not already exist. Due to the VaDOC approval process, these programs are still being evaluated and are slated to start in 2024. These new programs will greatly increase the number of incarcerated students enrolling in postsecondary education.

Three of the colleges that responded offer transferable associate degrees. Students in these programs are completing numerous courses such as Business, English, Algebra, and Humanities. The remaining colleges that responded offer noncredit stackable credential CTE programs, which are referred to as FastForward in Virginia. These programs consist of certification programs such as Certified Logistics Associate and Certified Logistics Technician, Manufacturing Specialist and Manufacturing Technician I, Heavy Equipment Operator, Welding, Carpentry, Plumbing, and Masonry. The colleges offering these CTE programs are carefully choosing occupations that have employers who are willing and able to hire program completers with barriers.



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Unduplicated headcount decreased from 233 students in 2020 to 79 in 2021 due to the coronavirus pandemic (expected to have only maintained that small number due to correspondence courses) and increased to 392 students in 2022, realizing an additional 159 students (396% increase) enrolled in postsecondary education. Per these data, incarcerated program completion increased by 1400% from four students completing in 2020 to 60 in 2022. Virginia's FastForward program completion rate sits at 95%, with more information found at <https://fastforwardva.org>. It is believed with the addition of FastForward programs for incarcerated individuals, more students are completing, and they are completing faster than those students currently enrolled in associate degree programs.

Thirteen colleges indicated offering programs within walls, with 10 net new programs having been implemented in 2022 and four new programs being developed in 2023. Two colleges that have never partnered with a prison or jail before are in the process of launching programs at two VaDOC facilities. It is the intent of this project to increase that number.

The Canvas course was launched in June 2023 and can be accessed at [Justice-Impacted Individuals: All-In-One \(vccs.edu\)](https://vccs.edu/Justice-Impacted-Individuals-All-In-One). The course includes an introduction to PEPs; information about creating a program and working with VaDOC and its memorandum of agreement/memorandum of understanding process; accreditation considerations; U.S. Department of Education requirements for PEPs; contacts at VaDOC and each VaDOC facility and community college; orientation for VCCS faculty; information about Second Chance Pell, funding, and scholarships; and links to other resources.

The Credits2Careers resource page for Justice-Impacted Individuals was launched in June 2023 and can be accessed at [Justice Impacted Individuals | Credits2Careers](https://vccs.edu/Justice-Impacted-Individuals-Credits2Careers). Once on this landing page, click on [Resource Center](#) to access the page created for individuals seeking educational-related resources that directly support individuals and students with barriers. The consortium and community colleges will work to add resources and materials to this site.

The final measure was increasing the number of members in the Higher Education for Incarcerated Students Consortium. The consortium started with a few community colleges that met with VaDOC to determine if starting a consortium would be viable. After determining that it was, LGF funded the effort. In 2021, roughly 40 college and VaDOC members met. Today, 112 members from various groups make up the consortium, with room for many more.

### Recommendations

Quantitative data were collected for this project to create a baseline for the number of colleges offering programs within walls, both in prisons and jails; the number of programs being offered; the number of students enrolled and completing; and the number of formerly incarcerated students continuing their studies at a Virginia community college after release. These data had not been collected before by VCCS and serve as a foundation for future study. As Pell Expansion continues and other funding and training opportunities become available, these data and resources will become more valuable to the stakeholders represented in this project.

As a disclaimer, it cannot be assumed that the Canvas course, launched in June 2023, affected any program or student outcomes reported in this study. It is recommended that future research determine the impact of such intervention by examining the usage, effectiveness, and impact of the Canvas course on colleges as they launch or expand programs within walls. Thirteen community colleges reported having programs in the survey, leaving 10 with the opportunity to use the Canvas All-in-One to launch new programs.

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However, one may deduce that the consortium, with its growing partnerships and sharing of resources and best practices, has had positive impacts on the expansion of higher education for justice-impacted individuals within Virginia's community colleges. LGF funded the feasibility study of such a consortium around 2017–18, and since then its growth has proven viable and sustaining. Today, the consortium meets monthly via Zoom and in person twice per year. Partners, colleges, and justice-impacted individuals share best practices, stories, program details, and other information for the betterment of expanding higher education for this population. This project included the hiring of a coordinator with concentrated efforts at expanding the consortium and the Canvas All-in-One resources.

Lastly, the resources page for justice-impacted individuals on the Credits2Careers website is still a work in progress. The goal is to work with the consortium to add more valuable information and referrals for this population as they not only explore educational opportunities but also seek funding and employment and work to overcome personal barriers.

### **Summary**

Education in the U.S. correctional system is a potent tool for reducing recidivism and fostering positive reintegration into society. By equipping incarcerated individuals with skills, knowledge, and confidence, these programs provide tangible pathways to employment and stability, breaking the cycle of reoffending. Ongoing commitment from policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders is essential to sustain and expand these efforts. Understanding the multifaceted value of correctional education—economic, social, and individual—enables a comprehensive approach that not only addresses immediate needs but also contributes to broader community resilience and social justice goals. Investing in the education of justice-impacted individuals is not merely a strategy for rehabilitation; it is an investment in human potential and societal well-being.

Launching new PEPs is already a daunting process. There are special relationships to be made and careful processes to navigate. With the 2023 Pell Expansion, U.S. DOE, VaDOC, and higher education institutions all had to develop new policies and procedures for implementing such programs. This developing process has delayed the normal, already convoluted approval of education programs for colleges and universities in carceral institutions. Not captured in all this are the new FastForward programs being implemented with local, county, and city jails and the numerous probation and parole partners throughout Virginia. These new partnerships are being expanded by college and consortium efforts to provide short-term credential programs and generate the much-needed talent for our demanding workforce needs.

This project aimed at increasing equity and access to postsecondary CTE from Virginia's community colleges for the justice-impacted population by standardizing program development and approval procedures; creating best practices for colleges that want to launch new programs within walls; and creating a platform that provides resources, career pathways, and CPL resources for the justice-impacted population. My recommendations are to continue supporting colleges' efforts to launch programs within walls; increase funding for training; increase collaborations with VaDOC, jails, detention centers, and probation and parole; increase access to technology (computers and online options) and equipment for training; collaborate on resources and employment opportunities; complete the CPL evaluation from VaDOC's CTE programs to VCCS's programs; and expand consortium efforts to support this population.

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I am excited to announce that as a result of this project, the Lumina Foundation has provided \$70,000 in REACH funds to the Virginia Foundation for Community College Education to support our efforts to train minority populations in approved REACH pathways (REACH stands for Racial Equity for Adult Credentials in Higher Education). With the knowledge that our Black and Brown Virginians are disproportionately affected by the justice system, the justice-impacted population was specifically noted in the VCCS REACH grant application.

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